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Italy and the Peace Conference

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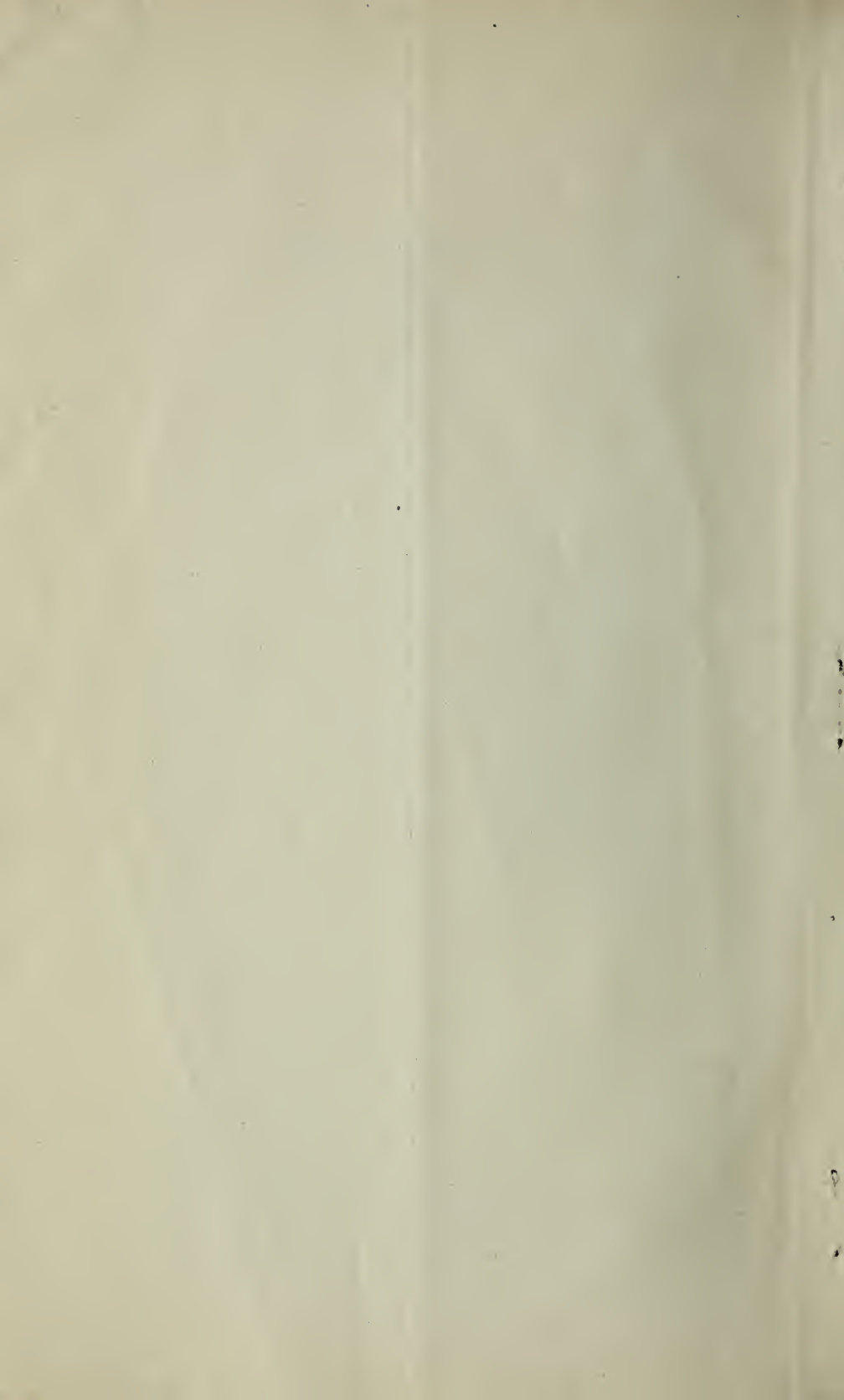
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ITALY AND THE PEACE CONFERENCE

Now that peace terms are under discussion, some of the profoundly difficult problems which must be handled by the representatives of the nations assembled at Versailles are becoming plainly outlined. Among these problems, none are more knotty and fraught with serious danger than those involving an equitable adjudication of certain of Italy's war claims. Because to date Italy insists upon the fulfillment of these claims to the very letter—upon her utter pound of flesh, that country is assailed from all quarters, as she was denounced in 1915, branded again for the narrowest selfishness, and roundly rebuked for an imperialism which cannot be squared with the democratic ideals for which the world has been told it was fighting. The country's spokesmen, on the other hand, competent and otherwise, seek to refute these harsh aspersions by demonstrating in speeches and writings the justness of her objectives, while the arch-opponents of her peace programme—South Slavs, Albanians, and Greeks, vigorously use like measures to anathematize them. Meanwhile the report comes that Italy's armies are not to be demobilized, together with curt assertions from certain Slavic quarters proclaiming a fearful readiness to accept again, if it must be, so grim a solvent as war. Such indeed, is the heat already engendered since the signing of the armistice, an ominous premonition of stormy controversy, or infinitely worse, ahead.

What then are these war claims, and what threatens to prevent their full attainment? Stated briefly, Italy, in this developing world crisis, has sought consistently to make her national existence secure. That has been her great purpose. To gain it meant for her principally reaching the following difficult objectives—first, the completion of her unification through the incorporation of Italia Irredenta so called, that is, the Trentino, certain lands about the lower Isonzo river and Trieste, and second, the attainment of supremacy in the Adriatic sea. This latter ambition is in truth part and parcel of Italian unification also, in so far as it, likewise, involves securing Trieste; further than that, however, its consummation means the establishment of Italian dominion over Dalmatia, coast and islands, and the attainment by Italy of a firm hold on the same side of the Adriatic in Albania. The vital importance of these objectives for Italy's welfare becomes manifest upon a brief analysis of them.

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Italy, since 1871, has looked forward to the completion of her unification on purely sentimental grounds; certainly it would be highly gratifying to her to feel that all the regions once a part of her ancient country, and at present inhabited by a majority Italian population, were incorporated forever in the motherland. Irredentism, however, has played its tremendously important role in modern Italian life not on sentimental, but on eminently practical grounds; these coveted bits of territory under alien control have left Italy with threatened frontiers in the north and north-east. A glance at a map, or a survey of Italian military operations in the war, will reveal the very real danger which the country has had to face because of Italia Irredenta. The Trentino is a powerful jut of most difficult mountainous country thrust into northern Italy, almost inaccessible to attack from the south, as Italy's campaigns in that theatre demonstrated, while, on the other hand, the rich Lombard plain, the heart of Italy, lies practically at the mercy of its possessors. Nor is the situation much better in the Julian Alps region, to the north-east, where again there is no satisfactory frontier. This unfortunate state of affairs dates from 1871. Italy's unification was accomplished tumultuously and piecemeal between 1859 and 1871, contingent for the most part upon intermittent foreign support—a process affording no time for the careful delimitation of frontiers.

And what of the Adriatic? Italians have long been of the opinion that the country controlling Dalmatia, *ipso facto*, held their country likewise in its grasp. The Adriatic is a great arm of the Mediterranean, approximately five hundred miles long, with a mean breadth of one hundred and ten miles, narrowing down however, at its southern extremity, across the Straits of Otranto, to a stretch of water some forty-five miles in width. The excellent Albanian harbor, Valona, one of the best in Western Europe, the Gibraltar of the Adriatic as it has been called, perfectly commands these straits. This sea washes an Italian shore, low-lying, shallow, exposed to the vast sweep of the north wind, and practically harborless. Venice and Brindisi lie almost at its respective extremities; neither is a first class haven, while Venice, furthermore, has its usefulness as a port constantly impaired because the four rivers, Isonzo, Piave, Adige, and Po, draining great reaches of the Alps and Apennines, steadily bring down into the head waters of the Adriatic great quantities of silt. The Dalmatian coast, on the other hand, is high, irregular, protected by a long fringe of islands, and affords an excellent harbor for every mile of shore.

As modern states have been organized, physical features like these must command urgent attention on the part of countries constrained to put up with them, and Italy is no exception, to this rule. Under the best of circumstances worry on her part over her general insecurity is readily comprehensible. Moreover, how her fears on this score have grown into a terrible incubus may likewise be understood, at least, when it is recollected that until yesterday, practically, Italy's hereditary enemy commanded these keys to her house. Austria and Italy indeed have never, in modern times, been friends; and this despite the Triple Alliance which Italy felt herself compelled to join in 1882 because of political exigencies beyond the scope of this discussion.

Nor is this all: Italy has feared Austria not only because of the latter's position squarely across her most vulnerable parts, but also for the additional reason that since 1875 she has seen in Austria a country with a powerful ambition to entrench herself still more firmly in the Balkans, thus jeopardizing the more Italy's security. In 1887 the Italian statesman, Crispi, said to Bismarck:

"We Italians must be interested in the near Eastern question. If the great powers, under agreement, would formally renounce all conquest in the Balkans, and declare that any territory taken from Turkey should be left autonomous, we would enter no objection to those arrangements. It is stated, however, that Russia, to attach Austria to herself, offers her Bosnia and Herzegovina. Italy can never permit Austria to occupy those territories. In 1866 Italy was left without a frontier in the eastern Alps; if now Austria secures these provinces, which would further fortify her on the Adriatic, our country will then find itself more than ever exposed to an invasion. It will be in a trap."

Yet the Congress of Berlin, arbitrarily "arranging" southeastern Europe after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, allowed Austria to "occupy" Bosnia and Herzegovina—a hard blow for Italy; nor could the latter country accept with any more assurance Austria's annexation of these Balkan lands in 1908.

Such well known facts in part explain Italy's intense anxiety when Austria sent her famous ultimatum to Serbia, unloosing the World War. Likewise they explain Italy's conditional neutrality upon the outbreak of the war; her seizure of Valona in Albania, in December, 1914; her nine months of bootless negotiation with the Central Powers through

which she sought to guarantee Italia Irredenta and Adriatic security forever; and, finally, her signature to the now notorious Secret Treaty of London, of April, 1915, and declaration of war against her former allies.

The country's policy has been consistently one of national defense. And today, though ancient dynasties have fallen, and amid their ruins tiny states helpless in their puny infancy have been born, Italy's geographical features are unaltered. Shall they never again menace her security—nay, shall they leave her in peace for the next twenty-five years? What historian dare hazard such an assurance! Therefore it is that to-day Italy still claims the fulfillment of these provisions of her bond.

Where lies the difficulty in a peace settlement for Italy mainly along these lines of the Secret Treaty of London? Just here. The Great War, with its outstanding slogan "making the world safe for democracy," has been won for the Allies and America, in no small measure, through the reaction of this magnificent battle-cry on numerous oppressed nationalities groaning under the hard dominion of the Central Powers. For the most part, these peoples, with racial and national instincts keyed high by repression, have hailed this bloody struggle against autocracy as a veritable crusade for liberty—a holy war which should make them free. With intense enthusiasm they have grasped the basic principles of democracy, have fought and died with astounding heroism for these fundamentals; now the war is over, and they too demand the fruits of victory. Across the Adriatic from Italy are several groups of these peoples, determined to be free and independent, and it is the attainment of this freedom and independence which must clash with the fulfillment of Italy's claims. These peoples are the Jugo (or South) Slavs, and the Albanians.

The South Slavs, that is, the Serbians, Croats, Slovenes, and Montenegrins, of whom the Croats and Slovenes have been under the jurisdiction of Austria-Hungary, number presumably some 13,000,000 souls, and constitute a heavy majority of the population in much of the land essential to Italian supremacy in the Adriatic, as Istria and Dalmatia. While to date there have been many evidences of antagonisms between these Slavic groups—chiefly due to cultural and religious differences, their political position, and the war itself—on the other hand, signs of a strong unanimity of feeling, a real national consciousness, are yet more obvious. All speak the same language, with slight variations;

their racial characteristics are the same; they have suffered together, and together they must be free.

In July of 1917, authorized representatives of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes issued an official statement through the Serbian Press Bureau on the Island of Corfu in which they affirm that " the desire of our people is to free itself from all foreign oppression and to constitute itself into a free, national, and independent state, based on the principle that every people is free to govern itself " The declaration then describes the "modern and democratic principles" on which this state shall be founded. Yugoslavia, according to this programme, shall be "a constitutional, democratic, and Parliamentary Monarchy," with the Serbian dynasty for its royal house. It is to include "all the territory where our nation lives in compact masses and without discontinuity, and where it could not be mutilated without injuring the vital interests of the community." Equality before the law, religious toleration, and universal suffrage are likewise proclaimed.

A year later, Jugoslavs in America had a great celebration at Washington, the principal feature of which was the raising of a Yugoslav flag—an emblem on which were interlaced the Arms of Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Prominent natives made speeches befitting the great occasion; peculiarly significant among the addresses was the stirring appeal for an oath of allegiance to the new banner urged upon all Jugoslavs present, by Don Niko Grskovitch, President of the Croatian League of America.

In September, 1918, the Jugoslavs declared their independence. They set forth in the remarkable manifesto embodying this act that ethnically they are one nation, and that they base their national rights and claims on that fact. Accepting entirely the principle of self determination, they demand for themselves "a peace which shall bring us union, independence, and liberty." Since this important step, the state of Yugoslavia has been rapidly taking shape. Late in November the National Council at Agram appointed Prince Alexander of Serbia as Regent. A State Council, comprising all the members of the Agram Council, fifty delegates from Serbia, and five from Montenegro, was summoned to meet at Sarajevo, and appointed a Yugoslav cabinet. As soon as conditions are settled enough, elections are to be held for a Constituent Assembly which is to sit at Sarajevo, determine the form of state to be set up, and adopt a constitution. The fundamental irreconcilability between all this development and the Italian programme for Adriatic supremacy is clear.

Next, what of Italy's grip on Albania, likewise recognized by the Treaty of London? An Italian "protectorate" over Albania must thwart the national aspirations of that people. Unfortunately this most interesting but primitive folk is largely inarticulate. Turkey has controlled the country for over four hundred years, so that there has been practically no opportunity for progress; instruction has been quite unknown. Contrasted therefore with the cry of the South Slavs, whose eager passionate yearnings for national independence have found wide response and sympathetic approval throughout most of the civilized world, the thin small voice sounding Albania's longings pipes nearly unheeded. Nay, those are not wanting who affirm that Albania has no voice, no longings; and these interpreters of peace conference problems outline a settlement for Albania largely based on Italy's desire for dominion there, taking cognizance too of the claims of Greece and the Jugoslavs on parts of the country. What of the Albanians themselves? They also have responded strongly to President Wilson's pronouncement on behalf of oppressed nationalities. Having fought and died for liberty and independence, they now look forward tensely to that cherished freedom almost within their grasp.

Evidences of a national feeling among Albanians are not wanting. When, in June of 1917, Italy proclaimed Albanian independence "under the shield and protection of the Italian Kingdom," the Albanian paper, *Dielli* (the Sun), mouthpiece of the National organization in New York City, spoke as follows:

"The proclamations by Austria and Italy, which came one after the other, are neither welcome nor well sounding. These powers are disputing between them the right of protection over Albania. The way in which each desires to reorganize and dominate Albania cannot meet our approval. We acknowledge with boundless pleasure any friendly protection, but we cannot even for a moment agree that Albania be reduced to the state of a vassal country. The Albanians are fighting for the real independence of Albania, and for this we can rely for assistance on her friends only. The Albanians desire that Albania should be for the Albanians. They do not wish her to be the tool of either Austria or Italy. Such a servile Albania would be the worst element in the Balkans, a fire-maker in the already troublesome peninsula."

The Albanians again have been decidedly conscious of those arbitrary adjustments, like that put into effect by the Ambassadorial Conference at London in 1912, which have placed sections of their country with the inhabitants under foreign jurisdiction; thus, for example, certain leaders of the country have requested Italy to represent them at the peace conference and to demand for them Epirus and parts of Serbia.

Furthermore the Albanian Federation in America, with headquarters in Boston, recently issued an authoritative statement to correct distorted views of their country and people. It surveys with evident pride the remarkable ancient and modern annals of this, the oldest people in western Europe, protests against their unfair treatment at the hands of their neighbors in most recent times, notes that the Albanians have made common cause with the Allies, that many of the seventy thousand Albanians in America are in service in the American armies, that, all told, their people have purchased nearly \$1,000,000 worth of Liberty bonds, thereby attesting the loyalty of this hard-working element in our population to their adopted land; and concludes with the noteworthy declaration that they look to America and the Allies at the peace conference for the restoration of their country's independence within ethnical boundaries.

Such are obvious witnesses of a national consciousness on the part of this people. The evidences may be few; that there are any such, under the circumstances, is highly significant. And finally, the little trustworthy information available about this people shows them to be a folk with intensely strong racial characteristics. Centuries long they have maintained themselves in their mountain fastnesses against successive waves of invasion, ultimately either absorbing or driving out their would-be conquerors. With a like tenacity, successive generations of Albanians resident in Greece and Italy through hundreds of years adhere staunchly to their native speech.

Signal virtues are theirs also, despite their tribal organization with its endless local warfare, their blood feuds and their gross ignorance. The following quotation speaks for itself:

“Brigandage, despite the prevailing myth on the subject, is practically unknown in Albania. The native is too proud and chivalrous—and these are his two main national characteristics—to lower himself to the condition of highwayman. As to the reputed fanaticism of the

Albanians and their constant religious strife, it may be said that religious toleration exists in Albania to a degree found nowhere else in the Balkans. Divided as the Albanians are into Moslems, Roman Catholics, and Greek Catholics, they have always managed to get along far better than Catholics and Protestants in Western Europe. In Albania there are today families in which one brother is a Moslem and another a Christian, yet they live in perfect harmony within the walls of the same home. In general the people of Albania are characterized by an innate and irresistible love for liberty, by intelligence and practical spirit, and by great eagerness for progress and civilization."¹

Such, in their outstanding features, are these sets of conflicting interests which point themselves more sharply day by day. On the one hand the indisputable national rights of Jugoslavs and Albanians, and on the other Italy's claim to the whole of Istria, to a large part of Dalmatia, and to sections of Albania, which cannot rest soundly on the firm basis of nationality whatever may be said for Italian majorities in various regions; claims, which despite certain good historical foundation, must in the last analysis find their truest *raison d'être* in the inalienable right of every nation to safeguard its own well being.

Surely, under the old diplomacy, Italy's objectives are entirely defensible; could she today be assured that the world has indeed been made anew, certainly she would relinquish her Adriatic programme with a profound sigh of relief; unfortunately that sore distraught country, weak and impoverished, cannot secure so splendid a conviction from allied statesmanship! Should Italy,² therefore, finally decide so to modify her claims that the young nations, her Adriatic neighbors, may be free to work out their several destinies without let or hindrance, in full independence, then shall this venerable mother of our Western civilization be hailed throughout the world for her profound faith in a new era to the ideals and security of which she has made heroic sacrifice!

¹"The Albanian Nationality", Constantine A. Chekrezi (formerly secretary to the International Commission of Control for Albania) in *Current History*, November, 1918.

²Signs indeed are not wanting which indicate a strong current in Italy in this direction. Over half a year ago now, a group of her intellectuals, including the historian Salvimini, certain Deputies and other notables, acting semi-officially, reached what promised to be a highly satisfactory agreement with the Jugoslavs. Both sides made concessions, or at least indicated a willingness to yield points in their conflicting ambitions. Presently again the horizon was overcast, and until the present all available



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